

Selected Excerpt from
Close Enough to Hear God Breathe: The Great Story of Divine Intimacy
By Greg Paul

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

For once, the Baptist was silent. He embraced the man with both arms, held him tight against his hollow chest, head bowed. Although he had been enthusiastically flinging people of all shapes and sizes into the water for hours, he now seemed reluctant, or perhaps even embarrassed. Gently, the Baptist lowered the man into the water, bending until his own arms were submerged to the biceps; a heartbeat's pause while he was completely out of sight, then the Baptist slowly raised him up again.

He sputtered and blew and rubbed his eyes as had everyone else. He smiled and, placing a hand against the Baptist's hairy cheek, spoke a few inaudible words as if in blessing. Then he turned and began wading toward the bank.

It was all so ordinary, just like the man himself, and yet while he was being baptized, no one else had gone into the river to stand close to the Baptist, as they usually did, in hopes that he or she might be next. There was no rush of people into the water now, either. The crowd stood in a peculiar silence along the banks, unmoving, except for those few who stepped aside to allow him space to climb out. The air itself had become strangely still.

His eyes were turned skyward, over the heads of the people. Those nearest him could see that his lips were moving soundlessly. The Baptist, forgotten for the moment, stood motionless behind him, his hands dangling in the hip-deep water.

There was a tearing sound from above—thunder, perhaps, is what some thought later. A curious purplish cloud formation—which looked like a gash across what had been, as far as anyone could remember, an empty sky only moments before—seemed to flutter open. A dark spot descending quickly from the gash—the “gash” seemed strangely near for a cloud—resolved into a dove, a very ordinary-looking dove, but with it came a gentle breeze, gentle and warm and beautifully moist in the desert air.

The man was smiling broadly, raising his eyebrows and looking up without tilting his head, as well he might, since the dove had landed upon it and sat there cooing comfortably. Several people laughed out loud. He nodded at the ones closest to him who had laughed (the dove undisturbed by the motion), sharing their delight.

The gash in the clouds rippled repeatedly, as a man's heart beats, and each time there was another puff of the warm breeze. As if the sky was breathing upon them. The sky breathed a word into them, all those people standing there looking at the man. With each breath a phrase:

“This is my son. My beloved. I am pleased with him.”

They all heard it, though it was so quiet it might have been easily missed. They knew the voice was speaking about the ordinary man, the man who looked like them. Many also heard the breeze speak directly to the man. Hearing it as they did, like the breath within their own bodies, they wondered if it spoke not also to each of them:

“You are my child—my son, my daughter. I love you. And I am pleased with you.”

This is the heart of the matter. This is the message that blows quietly, sweetly through the whole Bible. It's easy to lose it in the strictures of law, the violent stories of the people of Israel, the doom-laden pronouncements of the prophets, or the near-psychedelic foretelling of future events. It's so tender, so gentle, that it's easy to miss it blowing through my own little life story, with all its dramas and distractions.

There are a thousand other voices, most of them much louder and more insistent, that have other things to say about who I am. They say things that are demeaning or discouraging. Sometimes they say things that make me so proud of myself that I forget God is whispering his beautiful message to everyone else too. Sometimes they speak words that cut or bruise my soul, telling me I am unlovely and unlovable—a message I am unaccountably ready to believe. They may be the voices of people close to me, the culture around me, the advertising I can't escape, religion, education, or of my own innate insecurities or pride.

There are so many of these other voices, and they are so constant that I can't escape them. I need new "ears" to be able to hear what God has to say. As with the people of the Baptist's day, it begins with coming to the river of God's grace and being submerged in it. Dying to an old life, an old way of hearing, and rising again to a new life, which can only come as a gift from above. Confessing my sins—admitting that I am too broken to live the identity for which God made me. Repenting—changing the course of my thinking about myself, my world, and my Creator.

My child. My beloved. My pleasure.

It seems as if it should be easy to hear these words and believe them, but it's not. An entire life of discipleship cannot fully mine these three simple expressions. It's the work of a lifetime just to begin to truly believe them.

Because I was blessed with parents who were devout Christians, I began to follow Jesus when I was still only a little boy. For a long time, I sought specific guidance from God, through prayer and Scripture mostly, about where to go, what to do, and how and when to do it, and much, much more. In times past and in many different ways, he often gave me the instructions I was seeking, or at least I felt he did. But now, in these recent days, he speaks to me "in Son." Whispering through every Scripture, and into the intimate details of my own daily experience—for it is his life he is breathing into me, and my life he wants to redeem.

Over and over, as I lay my head on his chest, he says the same thing to me, knowing how hard it is for me to hear and believe:

"My child. My beloved. My pleasure."

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